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## *Hermeneutics and Discipleship*

While the history of the church since the Reformation has been, in some sense, a history of differences in the interpretation of Scripture, hermeneutics was not a polemical issue among the major reformers. There were exceptions, of course. Luther's quarrel with Erasmus in 1524-25 about the nature of the human will, and his quarrel with Zwingli at Marburg in 1529 about eucharistic doctrine certainly involved hermeneutical concerns, but the larger problem of the magisterial reformers was that of authority – religious, social, national, political. In their preaching and prolific writing of treatises and commentaries Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were obviously involved daily in hermeneutical issues in pastoral and scholarly contexts. Their debates with Roman Catholicism might have accented these issues except for the latter's invariable appeal to the authority of tradition. It was, in fact, the Anabaptists who brought hermeneutical issues to center stage for the reformers and whose different reading of the Scriptures led to their emphasis upon the constitutive affirmation of the love-ethic and discipleship.

It is clear that social, economic, personal, and political factors were involved in this development and that these helped to bring forth a people who read the Bible in a particular way. We think of Hans Hut and his revolutionary eschatology, of Jacob Hutter and economic communalism, of the influence of medieval mysticism upon central German Anabaptism. But there were also deep personal and group convictions which both grew out of the way the Anabaptists read the Scriptures and were the result of such reading. Why did the same times and places bring forth such different fruits – the hunters and the hunted –

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and how were these developments related to hermeneutics?

It is generally assumed, for example, that the Anabaptists were of one mind with Luther in his locating of final authority in the *sola scriptura* affirmation, but a careful reading of the record shows, as will be illustrated later, that there was actually considerable difference in what these two traditions understood the term to mean in practice. It is tempting to conclude that the Anabaptists were more consistent in applying the methodology implicit in the term and that Luther's theological presuppositions detoured him, but we should not assume that the Anabaptists, as 'Biblicists' came to the Scriptures without their own significant presuppositions. The intention of this essay is to elaborate upon one of these – obedience – and its implication for biblical understanding.

In my work with sixteenth century Anabaptism I have long observed a correlation they believed to exist between obedience to the known will of God and right biblical understanding and thinking, between obedience and the experience of further revelation. I have sometimes referred to this as an epistemology of obedience, that is, that their apprehension of new truths of faith was related directly to their actual faithfulness in discipleship. The well-known statement of Hans Denck immediately comes to mind: 'No man may truly know Christ, except he follow him in life' [*mit dem Leben*].<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Rothmann said it even more succinctly: 'And if we, with constant diligence, earnestly do what we understand we will daily be taught further by God.'<sup>2</sup>

I must confess that this approach to knowing and understanding the will of God has found resonance within the subjectivity of my own experience of faith in which every step of obedience potentially strengthens my identity and self-understanding as part of the divine plan for myself and for his people. Among the biblical texts giving support to this view in Jesus' response to the disciples' question, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?'

He replied, 'It has been granted to you to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven; but to those others it has not been granted. For the man who has will be given more, till he has

<sup>1</sup> *Schriften*, 2. Teil, Walter Feltmann, ed. (Gütersloh, 1956) 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Restitution*, 1534. Robert Stupperich, ed. *Die Schriften Bernhard Rothmanns* (Münster, 1970) 222.



enough and to spare; and the man who has not will forfeit even what he has. That is why I speak to them in parables; for they look without seeing, and listen without hearing or understanding. There is a prophecy of Isaiah which is being fulfilled for them: "You will hear and hear, but never understand; you will look and look, but never see. For this people has grown gross at heart; their ears are dull, and their eyes are closed. Otherwise, their eyes might see, their ears hear, and their heart understand, and then they might turn again, and I would heal them."<sup>3</sup>

(Matt. 13 : 11-16, NEB)

And another text from Paul:

Therefore, my brothers, I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. *Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.*

(Rom. 12 : 1-2, NEB; italics added)

Discussion of the hermeneutical implications of the correlation between doing and knowing is not new among Mennonites. The Menno Simons Lectures of 1964 on 'Anabaptist Interpretation of the Scriptures' constitute a significant contribution in this area,<sup>4</sup> as do the doctoral dissertations of Henry Poettcker<sup>5</sup> and William Klassen,<sup>6</sup> the monograph, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in Mennonite Theology* (1967) by Myron S. Augsberger, and the 1967 article on 'The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists' by John H. Yoder.<sup>7</sup> In the latter essay Yoder states:

The important thing about the correlating of commitment and knowledge is, however, not the emphasis that it places upon commitment and obedience, but rather the limitations it places upon knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Special issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* (MQR), XL (April, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Henry Poettcker, 'The Hermeneutics of Menno Simons'. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1961.

<sup>5</sup> William Klassen, 'The Hermeneutics of Pilgram Marpeck'. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1960.

<sup>7</sup> Yoder, MQR XLI (October, 1967) 307.

He further cites Irvin B. Horst as follows:

The concept of discipleship (*Nachfolge Christi*) among the Anabaptists, and to some extent among Martin Bucer and the Strasbourg reformers, has epistemological importance in connection with right thinking (*vera theologia*) and is thus more than a question of piety and ethics.<sup>7</sup>

For our present purposes we need to ask questions about the nature of this so-called epistemology of obedience and about its hermeneutical implications and roots. We need to be particularly concerned about the cause-effect relationship between the pre-suppositions the Anabaptists brought to the Bible and the new insights they took from it. Can obedience actually be identified as a valid hermeneutical principle applicable by all to the entire canon in all times and places, or is it only a peculiar Believers' Church way of doing biblical studies as ethics? Its central thrust is both about right biblical thinking and about the nature of revelation; how was the will of God known in Anabaptism?

#### THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

There was some diversity among the Anabaptists in their view of the Bible. Denck, Hut, Hans de Ries and their 'circles', for example, held that the external Word was transcended by the inner and eternal living Word, Christ, and his spirit. Their ultimate appeal was to the living Word rather than the written Word, but they did not minimize the authority of the written, nor did this view prevent them from being in general agreement with Menno, Marpeck, Rideman, and the Swiss Brethren about its central message. The Bible was the Word of God, but the Word of God was not limited to the Bible. Nevertheless, all revelation remained subject to the biblical norm. The first task of a new convert to Anabaptism was to study the Scriptures alone and in the 'hermeneutical community', to teach it to his or her children and to all who would listen, and to pray for true spiritual understanding. Many tried to memorize large sections of the Scriptures, not in order to become literalists in a negative sense but in order to really know what the call to faithfulness meant for them. One of them confessed:

<sup>7</sup> Yoder, 307.

'I hope to be able to learn one hundred chapters of the Testament by heart.'<sup>8</sup>

All of the reformers of the sixteenth century regarded the Bible as the sole authority for faith. The Anabaptists agreed with them but differed in what this meant for hermeneutics. First, they insisted that the Bible should apply to all of life and to everyone equally. There could be no division into inner and outer kingdoms, into clergy and laity. Second, true understanding of the gospel message rested upon distinguishing between different levels of biblical authority and a conviction about the continuing nature of divine revelation. 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . ' (Heb. 1: 1-2). The incarnation would not have been necessary if God's will could have been known perfectly under the Old Covenant. It was surely the Word of God, but imperfectly, as promise, as pointing prophetically to the divine fulfillment in him who was to come. Both covenants included law and grace, but with the New Covenant came an enabling to live the life of faith and obedience freely and joyfully. 'The servile [obedience] is Moses and produces Pharisees and scribes; the filial is Christ and makes children of God.'<sup>9</sup> The unity of the two covenants is not only maintained historically, but in their common purpose of revealing the redemptive purposes of God from the beginning of time. This purpose was fulfilled in Christ, whose life and work is testified to in the New Testament.

This meant that the Old Testament was subordinate in authority to the New, and that the Sermon on the Mount was the charter of ultimate appeal. The records of the debates and trials confirm this understanding. In 1531 Hans Pfistermeyer said:

The New Testament is more perfect than the Old, and the Old was fulfilled and interpreted by Christ . . . I make a great difference between the Old and New Testament and believe that the New Covenant, which was made with us, is much more perfect than the Old that was made with the Jews.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in J. C. Wenger, *Even Unto Death* (Richmond, 1961) 60.

<sup>9</sup> J. C. Wenger, ed.-transl., 'Two Kinds of Obedience', *MQR*, XXI, (January, 1947) 20.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe* (Scottsdale, 1950) 355.

The 1532 debate at Zofingen stated:

We say that the Old is the shadow, and that which is in unison with the words of Christ is light. This is clearly set forth by Christ (Matt. 20: 5) when he states the order of the Old Testament and of the world and adds, 'But it shall not be among you.'<sup>11</sup>

The Bern disputation of 1538 took a similar position:

We confess that the Old Testament is a witness of Christ. We accept it in so far as Christ has not abolished it and as it is in agreement with the New, and in so far as it pertains to faith, love, and a true Christian life.<sup>12</sup>

The Frankental debate of 1571 said:

We believe that the New Testament surpasses the Old. So much of the Old Testament as is not irreconcilable with the doctrine of Christ, we accept . . . If anything that is necessary for salvation and a godly life was not taught by Christ and the Apostles but is contained in the Old Testament Scriptures, we desire to be shown.<sup>13</sup>

The conceptual context for these statements was not a neo-Marcian antinomianism but complete acceptance of the total obedience of Christ to the will of the Father. This obedience was more than paradigmatic; it made the words of Christ binding and authoritative for all who truly desired to belong to him. It is this conviction which moves these statements beyond ethics to hermeneutics.

It is clear that having this kind of a canon within the canon will directly affect the hermeneutical task. In the sixteenth century the major reformers did not share this interpretative principle with the Anabaptists, though they had their own canons within the canon also. For them the unity and authority of God was revealed uniformly throughout both Covenants. They agreed with Tertullian's charge that heretics are always searching the Scriptures for texts suitable to their diabolical purposes, and 'Sermon on the Mount Christians' seemed to be doing just that. Anabaptist-Mennonite hermeneutic is shaped decisively by this approach to continuing revelation and the finality of it in Christ.

<sup>11</sup> Horsch, 355.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 355-356.

## THE FUNCTION OF THE SPIRIT IN INTERPRETATION

Anabaptists have often been identified as Biblicists or biblical literalists. To the extent to which this was true it may, in part, have been due to the lack of formal biblical and theological training, but even more to the deep conviction that God's will could be known directly from the Scriptures, without the aid of learned theologians. Menno Simons wrote:

You say, we are inexpert, unlearned, and know not the Scriptures. I reply: The Word is plain and needs no interpretation: namely, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . (Matt. 22 : 37, 39). Again, you shall give bread to the hungry and entertain the needy (Isa. 58 : 7) . . . All who do not understand such passages are more like irrational creatures than men, more like clods than Christians.<sup>14</sup>

Melchior Hofmann, who was himself not above spiritualizing a difficult text, wrote:

Therefore I warn all lovers of truth that they do not give themselves over to lofty arguments which are too hard for them, but that they hold themselves solely to the straightforward words of God in all simplicity.<sup>15</sup>

They believed that the Bible was written by men of faith to inspire faith, and that the primary purpose of this revelation was obedience.

When this kind of approach is pejoratively identified as biblical literalism it is usually assumed that the interpretation is simplistic, taken out of its historical and grammatical context, and applied legalistically. The Anabaptists, especially Menno, identified this kind of response as an easy attempt to get out from under the hard sayings of Jesus. The mitigating hermeneutical factor, which is usually ignored by the critics of literalism in Anabaptism, is the constant reliance upon the power of the Holy Spirit, not only in Denck and the 'left wing', who were influenced by the *Theologia Deutsch* and the mystical tradition, but also in Menno, Dirk Philips, Marpeck and all the others without exception – even Jacob Hutter. Thus Menno wrote:

<sup>14</sup> *Complete Works* (Scottsdale, 1956) 214.

<sup>15</sup> 'Ordinance of God', 1950, reprinted in George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, eds. *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia, 1957) 203.

Brethren . . . I am no Enoch, I am no Elias, I am not one who sees visions, I am no prophet who can teach and prophecy otherwise than what is written in the Word of God *and understood in the Spirit*.<sup>16</sup>

Rothmann wrote:

However, since God's kingdom does not consist in words but in power, I will never achieve the power of the knowledge of God unless God's Spirit drives me with power, teaches me, and leads me into the Scriptures.<sup>17</sup>

And Peter Rideman said: 'This knowledge, however, comes alone from the receiving of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>18</sup>

Marpeck wrote:

I find that Christ, Moses, the prophets, and apostles used the divine and biblical Scriptures in three ways. First, for teaching . . . Secondly, Scripture is used for admonition and warning to him who is already taught . . . Thirdly, there are commandments and prohibitions . . . Whoever does not use Holy Scripture with these three differences cannot with any certainty handle Holy Scripture. And especially where the Holy Spirit, the true teacher, does not precede in all knowledge of Christ, everything will be misused and wrong . . .<sup>19</sup>

There are also, of course, many references from Denck, Hut, and their 'circles'. 'The Spirit equips and arms the elect with the mind and thoughts of Christ.'<sup>20</sup> And further:

If there is a part in the whole that he cannot understand he does not despise the witness of Scripture but he searches diligently and compares them with each other. But he does not accept the Scripture before it has been interpreted for him through the anointing of the Spirit. When he does not understand he suspends his judgment and waits for God's revelation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Complete Works*, 310.

<sup>17</sup> *Restitution*, 1534, 221.

<sup>18</sup> *Account of our Religion, Doctrine and Faith* (London, 1950) 68.

<sup>19</sup> *Kunstabuch*. Letters of Pilgram Marpeck translated by William Klassen and Walter Klassen. In process of publication. Manuscript, 334-36.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Denck, *Recantation*, 1527. *Schriften 2. Teil*. Walter Fellmann, ed. (Gütersloh, 1956) 106.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 63.

Hans Hut said: 'The Word must be received in him with a true heart through the Holy Spirit and become flesh in us.'<sup>22</sup> And finally Jacob Hutter:

But the night will come when the cloud will no longer be visible. Then the Lord will no longer go before us in the pillar of cloud, but in the pillar of fire will God go before his own. That is the light and brilliance of his Holy Spirit and through God's Word . . .<sup>23</sup>

These statements are no more than illustrations of the vast documentary evidence supporting the statement that most Anabaptists took the Scriptures very seriously and usually literally, but always relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting their meaning. It might almost be identified as pneumatic exegesis in which the emphasis falls as much upon spiritual illumination as upon historical and intellectual understanding.

It was the Spirit who helped to bring about inner understanding of the text by helping them so to identify with the biblical events and message that the time and space gaps between the first and the sixteenth century believers were completely overcome. Marpeck believed he was still living in the time of the apostles. It was this identification with the present Christ which compelled them to ask the obvious question, 'Lord, what would you have me to do?' Knowing the will of God surely meant doing it. Would an earthly father ask his children to do the impossible and then punish them for not doing it? How much less the heavenly Father. Therefore it is possible to do what he asks his children to do.

Knowing and doing became a reciprocal experience of understanding and obedience, obedience and understanding. Through the Spirit the Word became powerful, alive, and immediate. It was he who kindled the kind of love which alone made knowing possible. Lack of obedience was not only a lack of love, but actually a lack of knowledge, since it was impossible to understand the Scriptures and the living Word apart from a love for Christ and a longing to do his will. To love meant to obey. The *Sitz im Leben* cycle, which so many scholars abort

by limiting themselves to historical meanings, was completed in the practical response which the Scriptures and the Spirit combined to create.

We need to pause briefly here to return to an earlier question about Luther and his hermeneutics. Did he not, we may ask, in effect say many of these same things, and is this part of what he meant by *sola scriptura*? Yes and no. Yes, of course, in that the first meaning of *sola scriptura* was to make the Scriptures alone normative for faith (and life?), the sole authority over against the Roman Catholic authority of papacy and tradition. It was Luther who, more than Erasmus and others, restored the written Word to its rightful place in the church. Yes, in that he believed lay people could read it with profit, and yes in the sense that he believed the Holy Spirit to be necessary for correct understanding of the Gospel. No, in that he, paradoxically, feared Anabaptist reliance upon the Spirit and their literal, lay interpretation. But no, particularly, in view of his own experience of grace which, conditioned by Augustinian ontology, made justification by faith the central principle of his hermeneutic, throwing the shadow of work righteousness over every effort at holiness. Some experts in hermeneutics say that the Bible must be read theologically before it can be read morally.<sup>24</sup> This is what Luther did and the results for ethics were not constructive.

Luther and the Anabaptists came with different questions. Luther's existential search for a gracious God led him, via Augustine and the medieval synthesis, to theology and sacrament. The Anabaptist search for a biblically paradigmatic community of faith and a life style of obedience led them to the way of the cross and the ethics of absolute obedience to the written and living Word. And these questions, in turn, were historically conditioned. For Luther it was nominalism, the *Theologia Deutsch*, and papal apostasy. The Swiss Anabaptists stood in the best humanist tradition of respect for the sources and stress upon human potential, including freedom of the will; the Dutch stood more in the tradition of the *Devotio Moderna*, late medieval piety, and Sacramentarianism. The mix of these similarities and differences

<sup>22</sup> *Glaubenszeugnisse oberdeutscher Taufgesinnter*, I. Lydia Müller, ed. (Leipzig, 1938) 34.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Fourth Epistle of Jacob Hutter', 1535, *Ibidem*, 154.

<sup>24</sup> J. A. Sanders, 'Hermeneutics', *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume (Nashville, 1976) 406 (g).



was bound to bring forth different hermeneutical methods and pre-suppositions.

#### KNOWING THE WILL OF GOD THROUGH CHRIST

In the theological circle on the question of how the will of God can be known the Anabaptists would probably have insisted that an understanding of the life and work of Christ is primary. He alone knew the full will of the Father and did it perfectly. He embodied in himself the constituent fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the New. He and the Father are one; to know him meant to know the Father. But how could Christ be known? Through *Nachfolge*, said the Anabaptists. And what did this require? At least two experiences: conversion and cross-bearing. It may be noted here that Luther also placed Christ at the center of his hermeneutic. When Gospel, i.e., justification by faith, could not be found in a text his comment tended to be, 'I flee to the wounds of Christ'. The authority of a text was tested by the dictum: '*treibt es Christum oder nicht?*' Yet even if it did, Luther did not associate conversion and cross-bearing with it. His was a different Christology shaped by his Augustinian understanding of predestination and bondage of the will. This inevitably led to a different reading and understanding of the Scriptures.

Anabaptist treatises on conversion are few, but the testimonies about changed lives are many. Only those who knew Christ could 'walk in the resurrection'. Then discipleship became participation in the very nature of God through the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit, as Rideman asserts:

We believe that in the Holy Spirit we have all comfort, delight and fruitfulness and that he confirms, brings to pass, carries out and perfects all things; that he also teaches, directs, and instructs us, assures us that we are children of God, and makes us one with God, so that through his working we become incorporated into and partakers of the divine nature and character. And this his work — God be praised! — we experience within ourselves in truth and power in the renewing of our heart.<sup>25</sup>

This emphasis is in keeping with that of Dirk Philips in his treatise

<sup>25</sup> *Account*, 38.

*On The New Birth*<sup>26</sup> and his statement,

therefore the law serves, or is conducive in part, to the new birth, in view of the fact that no one can be born again or spiritually quickened and no one can believe the gospel, except he first sincerely repent . . .<sup>27</sup>

In his 1524 letter to Thomas Müntzer, Conrad Grebel wrote:

The Scripture describes baptism for us thus, that it signifies that, by faith and the blood of Christ, sins have been washed away for him who is baptized, changes his mind, and believes before and after; that it signifies that a man is dead and ought to be dead to sin and walks in newness of life and spirit, and that he shall certainly be saved if, according to this meaning, by inner baptism he lives his faith.<sup>28</sup>

An early anonymous Anabaptist sermon states:

Except we are born anew we cannot see the Kingdom of God (John 3). There is no other birth, for whoever hears the Word of God and receives it into his heart, all which the Word teaches in his heart he is willing to do according to the will of God (1 Peter 4). If he does this, no longer doing the will of the world but the will of God, he is truly a child of God . . .<sup>29</sup>

The literature on conversion and regeneration in Anabaptism as the first step to the knowledge of God is so abundant that it may suffice simply to refer to the present writer's 1973 article on 'The Life of the Spirit in Anabaptism'<sup>30</sup> and to quote with approval the 1848 statement by Max Göbel:

The essential and distinguishing characteristic of this [Anabaptist] church is its great emphasis upon the actual personal conversion and regeneration of every Christian through the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

We note in nearly every instance cited the correlation between the experience of conversion-regeneration and the emphasis upon doing his

<sup>26</sup> *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, X, *De geschriften van Dirk Philips*, F. Piiper, ed. ('s-Gravenhage, 1914) 315 vlg.

<sup>27</sup> *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 237. Cf.: *BRN*, X, 339.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> J. C. Wenger, 'Two Early Anabaptist Tracts', *MQR*, XXII (January, 1948) 39.

<sup>30</sup> *MQR*, XLVII (October, 1973) 309-326.

<sup>31</sup> *Geschichte des Christlichen Lebens* (Koblenz, 1848) 37.

will. It is stated most epigrammatically in a treatise entitled, 'Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ', probably written by Michael Sattler, in the following words: 'Why should God make known his will if he would not will that a person do it?'.<sup>32</sup> The former prior of St. Peters did not speak these words lightly, and his fiery martyrdom was to place an indelible *imprimatur* upon them.

We have been saying that a faith commitment to God and to his Word is required if the Word is to be understood, a conviction that the biblical message is relevant and true, and that its prophecies and promises will be and are being fulfilled. It is this conviction which underlies the records of the *Martyrs Mirror* and which led Menno Simons to identify suffering as one of the marks of the true church. Christian suffering is never only for the sake of Christ but also always suffering with him, and in so doing achieving the intimacy and identification which leads to a true knowledge of the divine will. Suffering teaches patience, resignation, discipline, and that complete dependency on God which is the beginning of wisdom.

In Balthasar Hubmaier's *A Christian Instruction* of 1526-1527 Hans is asked, 'What is the nearest way by which one can go to eternal life?'. And Hans replies:

Through anguish, distress, suffering, persecution and death, for the sake of the name Christ Jesus. He himself had to suffer, and thus enter into his glory (Lk. 24). St. Paul also says: all who will live godly in Christ must endure persecution (2 Tim. 3). Where Christ is and lives, he bears his cross upon his shoulders, and gives to each Christian his own little cross to bear, and with it to follow him. We should wait for the little cross, and when it comes receive it willingly, with joy and patience, and not choose our own chips and scraps of wood in imagined spirituality, and lay them on ourselves without divine understanding.<sup>33</sup>

Hans Hut wrote:

If a man is to come to the knowledge of the living Son of God he must await the work of God through the cross of Christ which we must carry and follow in the footsteps of Christ . . . And all

<sup>32</sup> Edited by J. C. Wenger, *MQR* XX (October, 1946) 246ff.

<sup>33</sup> *The Works of Balthasar Hubmaier*. Translated by G. D. Davidson (1930) and revised by Walter Klaassen. Microfilm, p. 324.

who desire to grow in the body of Christ in which the Son of God is known . . . must also suffer with him and grow into the image of the Son of God . . .<sup>34</sup>

And Leonard Schiemer added:

Paul says that you are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ if you suffer with him . . . It is true, Christ's suffering destroys sin but only if he suffers in man.<sup>35</sup>

Jacob Hutter wrote:

Therefore be comforted and be of good courage, for God leads [his own] into hell and out again, he makes them sorrowful and then glad again, he gives death and also life, and after the storm he restores the sun.<sup>36</sup>

And finally the words of Menno Simons:

The fearful tyranny of this blind world has always lain upon the neck of the children of God and still lies there, and as has been said, probably always will lie there. For no way leads nor can lead through the door of life other than this only rocky and thorny way of the cross . . . Forasmuch then as the eternal wisdom knows very well our poor weakness, and since earthly ease, peace, and prosperity would so much like to overthrow us . . . therefore He has appointed the cross to serve as a rod that keeps watch over His own, by which He as a faithful Father keeps His dear children in discipline and piety, rouses them, and makes them go forward . . . We know very well, dear brethren, how that this cross seems to the flesh grievous, harsh and severe . . . But since it constantly adds to the piety of the pious, turns them away from the world and the flesh, makes them revere God and His Word . . . therefore all the true children of God are prepared to love, to do the will of the Father.<sup>37</sup>

If we return again to our question about how the will of God becomes known to believers, this discussion of conversion and suffering would seemingly point in the direction of pure subjectivity. The same might be said then about the earlier discussion of the function of the Holy

<sup>34</sup> *Glaubenszeugnisse*, 34. Translated by Walter Klaassen.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Hans Fischer, *Jakob Huter: Leben, Frömmigkeit, Briefe* (Newton, 1956) 23. Translated by Walter Klaassen.

<sup>37</sup> *Complete Works*, 597, 614, 619.

Spirit, but if subjectivity is the dominant conclusion about this methodology, it has been poorly stated. What was in mind was something of what Albrecht Bengel meant when he said, 'Apply yourself wholly to the text, and apply the text wholly to yourself', with this last discussion falling into the second half of his dictum.

There are many passages in the Bible in which the will of God is announced with 'objective' clarity. We think, for example, of the Decalogue. But note how quickly command follows revelation: 'I am the Lord your God . . . You shall have no other gods before me.' The well-known passage in Micah 6<sup>1</sup> is sometimes cited as 'objective' truth, but I know of no passage that combines hearing and doing more closely: 'He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.' Or again in Deuteronomy 30: 11ff.: 'For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you . . . it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.' Or take the case of the rich young man. In response to his question about eternal life Jesus answered, 'You know the commandments . . .', but the man was immediately moved from the cognitive level to the personal with the suggestion that he sell all and follow Jesus (Mk. 10: 17ff.). I have been unable to find a biblical passage which states explicitly or even implicitly that it is simply enough soteriologically to know the will of God, though there may be such. It is in responding to the revelation in surrender and total discipleship that grace and peace and new insight is received.

#### GRACE AND REVELATION

We have not taken time in this presentation to define either of the two terms given in our title – hermeneutics and discipleship – but have assumed considerable common understandings in both fields and, particularly, also some knowledge of Anabaptism. We have also done no more than indicate in a preliminary way what we are talking about when we refer to an epistemology of obedience. In addition to using the nature of biblical authority, the function of the Holy Spirit, and Christology as categories to illustrate the issues involved, others could have been used, particularly life style issues like economics, asceticism, and discipline. While the focus for this theme arose out of sixteenth

century Anabaptism, and therefore concentrated discussion in that field, more work needs to be done in testing this thesis with the materials of biblical history.

One of the major problems for further discussion in connection with the proposed thesis of a positive correlation between practical obedience and spiritual knowledge is the nature of grace. But in this field we have been so conditioned by the classical Augustinian tradition that we find it difficult to carry on meaningful discourse without using the traditional terms of sacrament, means of grace, original sin, the fall, conversion, synergism in largely Augustinian context and meaning, which is not very helpful from a Believers' Church perspective. But the question about the relation between grace, obedience, and knowing the will of God remains. Does biblical history not show how God again and again reveals himself precisely in situations of disobedience and sin?

J. A. Oosterbaan and Alvin J. Beachy have concerned themselves particularly with the meaning of grace in Anabaptism. For Oosterbaan grace is not a soteriological term but part of God's creative love from the beginning of time. He believes this understanding dominated most sixteenth century Anabaptist thought.<sup>26</sup> Beachy stresses the ontological change which takes place in the believer as he responds to the working of God in his life through the power of the Spirit.<sup>27</sup> Both of these interpretations seem to me to be helpful and correct. Revelation is indeed received in the midst of disobedience, but for the purpose of repentance and growth in holiness. It is conditional. Marpeck and Dirk Philips, in particular, stressed the gradual restoration of the original divine nature of man through the work of the second Adam. Dirk speaks of it as deification. But the many other Anabaptists cited would agree with them that the way of the cross, discipleship, leads to that kind of intimacy with the living Christ by which his will becomes that of the disciple, not simply cognitively, but totally and increasingly, and in the process transforming him into the image of Christ. When this happens discipleship becomes not only a hermeneutical principle to uncover biblical meanings but opens up the very meaning of life itself.

<sup>26</sup> J. A. Oosterbaan, 'Grace in Dutch Mennonite Theology', in *A Legacy of Faith*, C. J. Dyck, ed. (Newton, Kansas, 1962) 69-85.

<sup>27</sup> Alvin J. Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, 1977).